Grand Opera House Goes But Memories Live

What the Great Building Meant in the Musical Life of New York Despite the Handicap Forced Upon It by Its Owners—Famous Stars Who Made It Famous

The Grand Opera House, Eighth avenue and Twenty-third street, once the center of New York's musical world, now a landmark soon to pass before commerce.

IF a building could feel, what would be the sentiments of the Grand Opera House in New York city if it knew that it was doomed to destruction? A fine house like this one, with a stage 80 by 70, a comfortable auditorium, with seats far enough apart to prevent spectators from always being conscious of their knees, a foyer to stroll in between the acts—in a word, a house so well built and so capable of modern embellishment must feel—if it can feel at all—that it has done nothing to deserve its doom.

But fashion has decrees that no one is able to ignore, that a great and expensive monument has no power against, and it is helpless in the track of encroaching an all-absorbing business. Of what avail would be the plea to stay both fashion and business, which should rehearse the interesting history of this amusement house?

Who would waste a sigh because of its impending demolition, because Adelina Patti and her sister Carlotta used to go to shows here in charge of their stepbrother Barili?

Who cares that operatic history tells how in this house Clara Louise Kellogg, singer, adapter, translator, director, made the first attempt to sow the seed of American grand opera? And if in the same full chronicle it is restated that the American debut of beautiful rich-voiced Pauline Lucca occurred here, as well as that of the equally famous but ill-fated Ilma di Murska (they sang here on successive days in October, 1873), what is to be gained in the way of a respite for the famous house by these tender evocations of the past?

Nothing.

Time, relentless time, goes on unmoved by memories or tears. Change, as relentless, drives on, building, tearing down, rebuilding.

In the dying strains of "Il Trovatore," as they were sung by Max Strakosch's opera company on the night of January 9, 1868, there was felt by certain temperamental persons in the great audience an omen of the fate of the Grand Opera House. They left the building with their doubts confirmed that the beautiful house, so excellently suited to its purpose, would never be able to rival the popularity of the Academy of Music, farther down town but more central of situation as it was, either with the fashionables or the *hoi polloi* of New York.

Handicapped by Sponsors, House Faced a Struggle

Scoffed as this omen was with its predictions of bad luck by the money kings of that generation, who for a whim, a caprice, had determined to compel fame and popularity for the house, it worked more or less powerfully and continued to balk their efforts throughout the early chequered years.

Jay Gould and "Jim" Fisk, money magnates of the moment, were hardly the kind of men who could command and lead public opinion or direct successfully the fortunes of a house devoted to music. Their attempt to do so is one of the exhibitions of singularity that crop up continually in human nature. Gould, as a matter of fact, never had more than a lukewarm feeling for the enterprise, but Fisk, a much warmer nature, a man, despite all his faults, of wide sympathies, had it close to his heart. If the bullet fired by Edward Stokes on the staircase of the Broadway Central Hotel had not killed him, the name of the great building might not have degenerated into a misnomer so early in its career.

In many various ways, the more numerous because of this very name, the Grand Opera House has influenced the life of New York for over half a century. It has heard the greatest singers of their day, some of whom were heard only here in this country; it has staged a couple of world premieres in operas which have long been forgotten, nearly all of the famous tragedians of the days following our civil war trod its stage, and actors like Ristori, Nillson, Forrest, Ole Bull, Charles Kean, Ellen Tree, Davenport, Mounet-Sully, Edwin Booth and Lawrence Barrett are but a few of the long roster of celebrated performers who drew great audiences.

Astounding attractions like these long ago deserted the fine stage of the Grand Opera House, which in these latter days has been turned to vaudeville and moving pictures. But the end is near. Recently the Grand Opera House property, at the northwest corner of Eighth avenue and Twenty-third street, which has been owned by the Gould heirs since 1884, was sold. The building will be taken down and a modern giant office building, so rumor says, will take its place.

The neighborhood, like the Grand Opera House itself, rather disappointed the wiseacres who are always present to tell us what the future of this or that part of New York will be. In the palmy days of its construction a goodly number of what are called "nice people" had their homes in this vicinity. London Terrace, for instance, composed a rather pretentious collection of houses with well known names on the plates. The bijou dwelling erected by James Fisk for his favorite, Josie Mansfield, was not then, as it has long been, the almost solitary residence house on West Twenty-third street, but had many notable looking neighbors. This house, it may be said in passing, was the one rented and lived in by Lily Langtry during her first season in New York. It was secured for her by "Freddy" Gebhardt.

Chelsea Village Resented March of Business

Immediately to the south lay Chelsea village, which, strangely enough, has successfully, if silently, resisted the encroachment of business better than the neighborhood to the north. From Nineteenth street to Twenty-third street, in which vicinity still stands the fine old house once owned and lived in by Edwin Forrest, are to be found living the descendants of old New York families, but this resistance was not strong enough in West Twenty-third street. There all is changed since Jay Gould's day—all except the Grand Opera House, whose time has come now to yield.

In Chelsea lived Bishop Clement C. Moore, who is endeared to the child by his poem, "The Night Before Christmas," and this revered poet owned the land incorporating the site at the Eighth avenue corner. He leased it in 1843 to George C. Peters and William C. Lent, who operated a line of stage coaches to Westchester and New Jersey. In 1864, Samuel N. Pike of Cincinnati bought the lease and acquired the fee. He put up the present building and called it Pike's Opera House. Mr. Pike's daughter is still living in New York.

James Fisk and Jay Gould purchased the house after it had been open less than a year. Gould almost at once retired from any active management and Fisk renamed the house and started in to carry out his ambition to make it world famous for opera, ballet and spectacle. In its strange history before T. Henry French became the lessee, two productions indicative of Fisk's dramatic taste stand out. These were "The Tempest" and "The Twelve Temptations." Of the latter, legend reports there were more shocks in it than were to be had from the famous "Black Crook," but to our more sophisticated modern ideas of a ballet, these appear quite innocuous.

Gould and Fisk Hid In Opera House in Panic

Unfortunately for the success of these first efforts, there existed a prejudice in those stirring days following the civil war against men who mixed up in their business affairs grand opera and corners in the gold market. Jay Gould, perhaps realized this feeling and promptly withdrew the use of his name, but James Fisk went ahead boldly doing just what he liked.

Matters reached a climax in the fall of 1869, when the manipulation of these two daring speculators in their attempt to corner the market culminated in the panic known as "Black Friday," on September 24, of that year. The feeling against Gould and Fisk rose so high that their lives were in danger. They took refuge from the mob in the Grand Opera House, where they lay in hiding for several days.

Jay Gould purchased the property after Fisk's death, and under new managers the policy of the house changed from opera to drama. Among the successive managers were Henry E. Abbey, Poole and Donnelly, and Augustin Daly. The conjunction of these names will indicate to the knowing theater-goers how many varieties of plays were offered at the house.

In these days when a contract between impresario and singer is too often treated as a "scrap of paper" the sensation created when Pauline Lucca, tired and bored in Berlin, where she had a life contract, broke it and ran away to sing in America, cannot be justly estimated. It made floods of talk and filled columns in the newspapers. She was in her prime, for she had been singing only fourteen years since her debut in "Ernani."

New York rose tumultuously in recognition of her beauty, grace and wonderful voice. The city well knew how to judge voice, for in its early days it had a standard set by Patti, who made her first appearance in opera here, by the beautiful Euphrosyne Parepa-Rosa and by Malibran. Pauline Lucca's audiences were true music lovers. They held the palm suspended for some time between this diva and di Murska, the divine Ilma, whom they were to hold for so long and whose miserable death by self poisoning they were later to deplore.

Minnie Hauck was a New York girl, who sang in opera in this house not long after her debut as *Amina* in "Sonnambula" in Brooklyn, in 1866. Her apearances were generally made here in "Carmen," a part with which she was not long in identifying her name. Later she brought to this house her own company and whenever she sang herself carriages conveying fashion to the West Side of town completely blocked transit on Twenty-third and its contributing streets.

Above is Josie Mansfield, whose public career was linked with the Grand Opera House. At left is Pauline Lucca, who made her American debut in the old building.

The immortal Adelina Patti was one of many great artists of her day who made the Grand Opera House a Mecca.

European singers famous in their day won much of the additional fame they came to America for by appearing in this house and many of these are quite forgotten, save in yellowed programmes or in minds even less accurate, age having dimmed their recollection of dates. Among these came Krauss, who by reason of her superior acting was called the "Singing Rachel," and Julie Aimee and Elizabeth Lawrowska, a star of Russia.

Dimmer, almost lost in legend, is the story of Anna Hunt, an American girl who at a very early age proved on the stage that she possessed one of the most beautiful voices of her time. Almost without instruction, certainly she appears to have been without operatic coaching, she formed her own opera company and was the first to give opera in San Francisco. She had married her conductor, a M. Thillon, when she invaded New York, and leased for a period of weeks the Grand Opera House. Little has been preserved in recollection of this bold girl's experiment, save that it was far from meeting her expectations, and but one opera represented by herself and associates had any real "draw." This was Auber's "Diamonds of the Crown," a piece that has been entirely forgotten.

Offenbach's lighter pieces frequently were given in this house by different visiting artists. "La Belle Helene," "La Creole" and "Madame Favart," covering a period from 1870 to 1878, all had prodigious success, and again on such occasions the beauty and fashion of the city displayed itself nightly in the orchestra circle and broad balcony, as well as in the boxes.

More Deeply Connected With Speaking Drama

These song events were sporadic, however, and ere long the house became more deeply connected with the acting drama. Besides the foreign celebrities who made their bow here, whose names have been briefly mentioned already, the list of well known American actors who trod these boards in their day includes Joseph Jefferson, James O'Neill, Emma Abbott, Richard Mansfield, Fanny Davenport, Clara Morris, Edwin Booth, Lawrence Barrett, Lester Wallack, Mr. and Mrs. McKee Rankin, Mary Anderson, Digby Bell, Madame Janauschek, Nat Goodwin, Robson and Crane and Denman Thompson.

Others as popular as those in thic list might very well be written here, for in the day of the star system the season of every active company usually began or ended with a couple of weeks at this house. And when a visiting star had played a season on Broadway it was customary to present him here for a brief season before he left the city. Such was the policy of the house during the 1880s and 90s.

By that time the audiences of the Grand Opera House had completely changed. Only now and then a seeker after some novelty in diet would leave the beaten track of Broadway to cross to the West to see what the Grand Opera House was offering. Occasionally a melodrama of the most lurid type would be produced there and then the house would be filled nightly by the people on whom it could most surely depend. These audiences fell off alarmingly when a serious society drama or a revival of a Shakespearian piece went on.

"No Marriage Bells for Her," was one of the late successes of the house. This piece and others of kindred type rarely failed in drawing a big audience, one to which opera in the grand style would have made no appeal and which got very little in the way of entertainment from comedy except of the knockabout variety.

Therefore the step to vaudeville was made in natural transition, although the house was too big to afford this kind of show its best opportunity. The cinema made its inroad there somewhat stealthily; in its early days, when moving pictures of several reels were a novelty, these were exhibited in this house to invited audiences. It was not very long, of course, before they were comfortably installed there.

Sic transit gloria. Fame, glory, every human prize has its day and passes. A house hallowed by greater memories than those which cluster round the Grand Opera House can hold to none of these things if trade passes it by. A long string of once very popular theaters have disappeared from New York, the disappearance of this one must have been discounted long ago.

Germany Startles World with Synthetic Coal

ALCHEMY, the crude chemistry that sought the transmutation of base metals into gold, has not been accomplished—despite the recent declaration to the effect that German science had achieved a synthetic gold equal in quality to the most precious metal mined. Unfortunately for Germany, perhaps; but fortunately for the other countries of the world that statement was based upon a misunderstanding. It is not synthetic gold which has been made by German scientists; it is synthetic coal, "black gold," and that is vastly more important.

A druggist in Munich—Prueckner, his name—has actually managed to produce a high grade anthracite from stone quarries. It is quite true that such a transmutation has not interested the scientists of all the ages and is not as engaging to the minds of modern scientists as elusive alchemy has interested them, but the discovery of a method of producing coal without mines is really much more pertinent just now, and to Germany the end is the same—and better.

If it had been true that Germany had found a way to make gold from tinfoil or pewter then it is likely the new and chaotic republic would have started forthwith down the path of industrial decay, and the German people would have begun training to be "Lotos Eaters" indeed. But coal!—well, coal is a different influence. It is the life giver to German industry. It will set the wheels of industry alive, and more than the scientists will be held in the thrall of coal. To the new industrial Germany coal and iron and steel are the masters of all men. And coal is the master of iron and steel.

Consequently, science, economics, statecraft and labor are equally interested and enthused by the discovery of the process of producing synthetic coal. Prueckner's discovery promises to be of far greater benefit than even the discovery of great gold deposits could be.

Germany has lost its richest coal mines in Upper Silesia to Poland. It is considered probable that the French will keep the Sarre Valley, and are eagerly looking for any opportunity to occupy and retain the Ruhr district, containing the most important coal mines of Continental Europe and the only rich anthracite territory still under German control. Germany's water power resources are relatively small; if fully developed they will not yield more than 2,000,000 horse-power of "white coal," since the French, in the Versailles Treaty, secured the exclusive right to develop the Rhine between Basel and Lauterburg, and the other big rivers, with the exception of the Weser, have been internationalized.

So it seems that Germany's very existence was placed in jeopardy, the more so as the peace treaty prevents her from entering into commercial treaties, except on minor subjects.

Nineteenth and twentieth century civilization is largely based on the use of mechanical power for the purpose of production. The mutual relations of mechanical power and civilization have never been driven home to the public at large as they have been brought to universal attention by the world wide coal shortage during the war.

Though the Berlin Patent Office has not yet rendered a decision of Prueckner's application for a patent on his synthetic coal process the fact that Prueckner produced synthetic coal that in every respect is the equal of anthracite has been established beyond any doubt by a number of official practical tests.

One of the tests was made to ascertain the heating power of each of the two kinds of fuel. The synthetic coal burned without a smell and with an insignificant volume of smoke and produced 7995 heat units per 100 kilogrammes, 220 pounds, while anthracite coal has a heating power of from 7,000 to 8,000 heat units per 100 kilogrammes and emits many times more smoke, causing the well known odor. That means that synthetic coal, if used to produce directly heat or steam, at least equals high grade anthracite.

Still more favorable was the gas test. One hundred kilogrammes of anthracite were placed in one retort and the same quantity of synthetic coal in another. Both retorts were subjected to the same heat, and their contents converted into gas and coke.

The gas obtained from the synthetic coal yielded more heat units per second while it lasted and it lasted longer than the anthracite. The coke of both kinds of coal equaled in weight and heating power. That result is of special importance because Germany is consistently striving to restrict consumption of coal to factories and gas works, and has made already much progress in that direction.

The heat from burning coal is to be utilized to make steam to drive stationary engines. But thereby not more than 18 per cent. of the inherent power of coal can be utilized. Not to waste the remaining power, the fires beneath the boilers will be connected with gas generating plants, the illuminating gas yielding about twice as much heat or power as the direct burning of coal.

The chief by-product of that process is coke to be burned on board of ships and in households, which may also use either illuminating gas or hydrogen gas for heating purposes. The hydrogen gas is produced by pouring water on live coke. Small and medium industrial establishments will by and by have to install gas motors and use illuminating or hydrogen gas. Dr. Walther Rathenau, former president of the Allgemeine Elektricitaets-Gesellschaft (General Electric Company), estimated that by these improvements coal consumption can be reduced by 50 per cent.

The process of production of synthetic coal is simple, according to Prueckner, who operates near Munich a small plant. Prueckner said:

"Factories will be erected in the vicinity of quarries. Two different kinds of soft stones are crushed and ground into fine sand and mixed with certain chemicals. The mixture will be moistened, pressed into briquets, heated, dried and cooled.

"The synthetic coal industry will not depend on anthracite or bituminous or subbituminous coal or peat, or their by-products, or on any other material used as fuel.

"Germany, like nearly every other country, has a superabundance of the necessary minerals and can produce the chemicals in unlimited quantities.

"As produced in the little plant near Munich, synthetic coal can be sold to the consumer at half the price of anthracite. It is certain that the cost of the product will be reduced when manufacture on a large scale is begun."

The formula is of course kept secret at the present time, and probably will not be disclosed when a patent is granted. For of all the victors of the world war, only three—England, Belgium and Italy—have renounced up to now their Versailles Treaty privilege to subject the "property, rights and interests of German nationals to exceptional war measures that have been or will be taken with regard to them"—in other words, to seize German property, including patents.

For that reason there is no prospect that synthetic coal will be produced outside of Germany until a non-German makes an invention similar or identical with that of Prueckner, the Munich druggist.